

Conservation SHOWCASE



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NRCS

Natural Resources
Conservation Service

EQIP Helps Row Crop Farmers Diversify

When Manuel Imperial emigrated from the Philippines in the early 1980s to help out on his uncle's farm, he had no idea how hard the work would be. This is when Imperial, who was only 15 years old at the time, along with his sister, Virginia, and three brothers, Marcello, Melchor and Marlo first put down roots in a small community near Yakima, WA where his uncle owned about 40 acres of farmland.

"We just got here at 8 o'clock at night. At 4 am my uncle says it's time to get up and start working. I could only carry one gunny sack of onions on the first day," Imperial remembers. "It's a lot of work – we work a lot of long hours. We're one of the worst workaholics in the Yakima Valley."

Now, over 20 years later, the Imperial farm has grown to 1000 acres, specializing in row-crops. Imperial grows everything from asparagus, peas, zucchini, and squash to melons, corn, tomatoes and peppers. "We're so diversified, it drives me nuts sometimes," Imperial mused.

Still after so many years on the family farm, Imperial finds the work rewarding. "My family's philosophy is, there's only a few row crops growers left – people love the food that we grow, and the community supports us too. In farming

Above: Marcello and Manuel Imperial standing next to one of their fall row crops at Imperial's Garden in Yakima, WA.



NRCS Civil Engineering Technician Martin Rodriguez discusses their fall produce crop with Marcello (center) and Manuel Imperial at the Imperial's Garden farm stand in Yakima, WA.

you don't make a lot of money – but we feed a lot of people and I think that's the rewarding part of it."

You can find Imperial's produce at many local grocery stores and through wholesalers who stock military commissaries in the Northwest.

About 10 years ago, though, Imperial was looking for a way to stay competitive in the local market, and improve the quality of his produce. Enter USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). At first, Imperial was leery to sign a contract with a government agency. "I finally worked it out and it's the best thing that happened to us," said Imperial.

Imperial worked with Martin Rodriguez, Civil Engineering Technician in the Zillah field office to set up multiple conservation practices on his farm. Using the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Imperial is now able to compete in the marketplace with high-quality produce. Utilizing EQIP

funding, Imperial set up an Irrigation Water Management (IWM) system on his farm, allowing him to filter the water he uses to water his crops – and use less. Previously, he'd been using an open ditch, tube and flood irrigation system, which wasted water and flushed a lot of the topsoil away. With IWM, Imperial has now transitioned to a drip-irrigation system, which allows him to filter dirty water and apply on an as needed basis, keeping the chemicals and run-off out of the Yakima River.

"This system comes on sooner and stays on longer, also, which really fits an operation like this- especially when companies are looking for product earlier in the season or later in the season, they are able to meet the market needs," said Rodriguez.

Imperial also utilized EQIP funding to set up nutrient management and pest management systems on his farm, which in turn, reduced his use of chemicals. Imperial can then just apply nutrients as the plant uses it, reducing waste.

Additionally, spot application of chemicals allow him to save more money and put it back into conservation practices on his farm.

In the future, Imperial wants to grow his business even further. He plans to purchase the land adjacent to his in order to put it into production, but first he wants to control the noxious weeds. By expanding he can put in nursery crops first, then regular crops, and two years later get the soil into production. He also is interested in treating more resource concerns, utilizing the technical and financial assistance from NRCS.

"These guys are really helpful and nice to work with. They help you with what you need. I really appreciate them," said Imperial of the NRCS field staff.

Even though the work has been hard, Imperial has been successful in the way he always dreamed of – supporting his family, helping the community, and feeding a lot of people.



Butternut squash is just one of the many row crops the Imperials grow and sell at their roadside farm stand.